

Testimony of

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Air Traffic Control Delays

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Good morning Madam Chairwoman, Senator Rockefeller, and members of the Subcommittee. I want to thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss the problem of airline delays and proposed solutions. I am John Carr, President of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association.

NATCA is the exclusive representative of over 15,000 air traffic controllers serving the FAA, Department of Defense and private sector. In addition, NATCA represents approximately 1,200 FAA engineers, over 600 traffic management coordinators, agency operational support staff, regional personnel from FAA's logistics, budget, finance and computer specialist divisions, and agency occupational health specialists, nurses and medical program specialists.

Airline delays and cancellations, capacity and access constraints, and traffic congestion continue to plague our National Airspace System. Passenger frustration is over the top and customers are unhappy. That's the bad news. The good news is that the aviation community has stepped up to the plate. NATCA, the FAA, the pilots, the airlines, the airports, and others are working together to develop and implement concrete solutions.

Aviation delays are a multi-faceted problem and just as there is not one cause, there is also no blanket solution or quick fix to the problem. Today, I would like to discuss a number of topics - capacity enhancements, airport capacity, capacity management, separation standards, operational errors, National Airspace Redesign, air traffic controller staffing and retirements, and privatization - that seem to surface in the capacity dilemma.

First, there are capacity enhancements in the form of new technology and air traffic procedures. The FAA, under the leadership of Administrator Garvey, has made significant progress in modernizing the air traffic control system. Our system can no longer be characterized as “outdated and antiquated.” NATCA is a firm supporter and partner in Administrator Garvey’s evolution not revolution strategy of “build a little, test a little, deploy a little,” and we will remain an advocate of this throughout the modernization effort.

Over the past 3 years, the FAA has replaced or upgraded most of the major components of the air traffic control system. The radar displays (Display System Replacement) and the Host hardware in the 20 en route centers have been replaced. One hundred and thirty-one automation systems have been modernized (ARTS IIE) at low-to-medium density facilities, new hardware color displays (ACD) have been installed at five large facilities, the automation and hardware systems have been upgraded at higher demand facilities in Atlanta and Northern California, and automation systems (ARTS IIIE) are being fielded at St. Louis and Minneapolis to meet Free Flight Initiatives. In addition, the Standard Terminal Automated Replacement System has moved from development to deployment with initial versions operational in Syracuse, NY and El Paso, TX. All of these activities are essential to meeting the present and future demands of our air traffic control system.

Can the air traffic control system be improved? Absolutely, and NATCA is working day and night with the FAA to move new technologies into the workplace as quickly, efficiently and safely as possible. FAA modernization is an ongoing process and NATCA is directly involved in every

technology project from its inception. This collaboration and teamwork has been instrumental in ensuring the success of modernization projects such as DSR and STARS. NATCA currently has representatives on over 65 technical projects, and we will continue to lead both the agency and the industry into the 21st Century.

While continuing upgrades and new technological advances are necessary to ensure safe, efficient travel in the future, they will not solve the problem of delays. According to the FAA and MITRE Corporation, improvements in air traffic control technology will enhance system capacity by 5 to 15 percent at best. While newer equipment will greatly increase reliability, it will not change the number of aircraft that can land or depart at any given time.

There is no question that increased airport capacity will have a significant impact on reducing airline delays. Part of the reason we are here today is that airport construction – terminals, taxiways, runways, gates – has not kept pace with passenger growth. According to the July 25, 2000 DOT Inspector General Audit Report, only nine new runways were opened at the country's 100 largest airports between 1995 and 1999. And, only three of these nine runways were built at the nation's 28 largest airports.

Capacity can be increased through construction, and AIR-21 provides the necessary financial resources. Fifty miles of concrete poured at our nation's 25 busiest airports will solve most of our aviation delays. A new runway can allow 30 to 40 more operations per hour. The problem, however, is that any airport construction or expansion plan faces a number of obstacles including

political hurdles, space limitations, community opposition, noise restrictions and environmental concerns. It can take years for a project to be approved. Meanwhile, we are fast approaching a crisis situation with respect to aviation gridlock.

This is where capacity management comes into play. An airport's capacity to handle air traffic is a function of its size, the layout of its runways, the air traffic patterns, both arriving and departing, and the time frame in which a surge of traffic must be dealt with due to airline scheduling. Our system is built to allow for unfettered discretion in adding demand. However, you can not add limitless demand to a finite system. Case in point is what happened at New York's LaGuardia Airport last summer when airlines filed for 600 slot exemptions within about a week. Market forces failed to limit the number of flights at LaGuardia, so the FAA and the New York/New Jersey Port Authority had to step in.

Delays occur every day at every major U.S. airport. Schedules are made to reduce operating costs and maximize revenue without regard for other airlines, terminal airspace or airport capacity. At "peak" times, dozens of planes are simultaneously taxiing for take-off or queuing above the airport in a finite amount of terminal airspace. This is where the laws of physics kick in. Given runway capacity, only certain number of flights can depart and arrive within a specified time period. Therefore, scheduling during peak hours contributes to delays at busy airports even in good weather. All scheduled flights will not be able to arrive on time. Responsible scheduling of flights within airport capacity limits will go a long way toward alleviating delays.

There is unused capacity in the system. All one has to do is look at the success enjoyed by Southwest Airlines to see proof of this. The DOT Inspector General notes in the July 25, 2000 Audit Report, “Air Carrier Flight Delays and Cancellations” that the majority of the increase in flight operations and passenger enplanements over the next 15 years will occur at the nation’s 28 largest airports. While most of these airports and the surrounding airspace have already exceeded existing capacity, regional airports are being underused and ignored. A close examination of the use of our nation’s existing airports is needed. NATCA believes that certain city airports are better suited for originating and/or terminating flights than associated hub airports. Increased usage of these airports by passengers and airlines will alleviate congestion and delays at the hubs.

It may also be possible to find unused capacity through a close examination of the requirements for separating aircraft. Separation standards are designed to ensure the safety of aircraft and its passengers from other aircraft. The FAA separation standards, which date back to the 1950s, require 5 miles laterally in the enroute environment, 3 miles laterally in the terminal airspace, and 1,000 to 2,000 feet vertical depending on altitude. Attempts to determine the origin and basis for the current separation standards have revealed that they were apparently the result of qualitative judgements. There are no documents that explain how the three and five mile standards were derived. It is, however, generally accepted that the standards are the result of a number of factors including practices used by the military, radar equipment limitations, pilot acceptance, and to provide for a practical time and distance buffer.

Today, we have the scientific methods and computer simulation tools needed to examine the separation standards. NATCA is willing to join with the NTSB, NASA, the pilots, the FAA and other interested parties to carefully examine the possibility of reducing the separation standards. In April, I met with Professor John Hansman from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology International Center for Air Transportation, Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Professor Hansman is researching the dynamics of the emerging capacity crisis in our country and is evaluating the current separation standards. Professor Hansman's data shows that while separation standards have remained unchanged radar performance has improved five-fold.

While air traffic controllers are using 1970s radar with 1980s radios and 1990s scopes, they are using 1950s separation standards. Any marginal or fractional decrease in separation standards could instantaneously free up unused capacity in the system. However, any decrease must also be measured against the litmus test of safety.

While we are on the subject of safety margins, I would like to mention the progress that NATCA has made with the FAA on operational errors. We are working to minimize the number of errors while developing a better understanding of the chain of events that can lead to a loss of minimum separation. Historically, an operational error has been counted the same whether separation between aircraft was reduced to one mile or 4.9 miles. Now, a new way of categorizing errors has been established to reflect the impact on safety using a high, moderate or low risk factor formula. Point values are assessed using a formula that takes into account altitude, speed and direction. NATCA is pleased that an environment of learning and investigation has replaced the former

punitive approach toward controllers who had an operational error.

While we are working to reduce operational errors, it is important to keep the issue in perspective. According to the Department of Transportation, the rate of errors last year was .68 for every 100,000 operations. This equates to one operational error every 147,000 operations. In addition, only six percent of the current air traffic controller workforce has had an operational error in the last two and a half years. Of that group, only twenty percent had more than one.

While safety is the responsibility of all participants in the nation's air transportation system, the FAA's air traffic controller workforce serves on the front line, managing thousands of commercial, military, and general aviation operations on a daily basis. The 15,000 professional air traffic controllers are essential to the seamless, safe and efficient movement of these aircraft at airports, approach control centers, and enroute centers. We need to ensure that there are enough qualified and trained air traffic controllers to handle the increased traffic growth, the opening of new sectors and airways, and to prepare for the impending retirement crunch.

The five-year agreement between the FAA and NATCA, signed in 1998, calls for a "baseline" of 15,000 air traffic controllers for the first three years. The agreement calls for 15,300 full-time equivalents in 2002, and 15,606 in 2003. The Administration's FY2002 budget request, which provides for the hiring of 600 more air traffic controllers, is consistent with this. NATCA does not support reopening our contract. However, we do have a fundamental disagreement with the

agency over the terminology used in the contract. NATCA believes that term “baseline” refers to a floor, and therefore the 15,000 figure represents the minimum number of air traffic controllers.

It is quite simple. If we continue to add new sectors to accommodate the traffic growth, we need to add more air traffic controllers. This is especially true when looking at the National Airspace Redesign (NAR) project which will review, redesign and restructure our national airspace to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of all customers and service providers while maintaining the high standards of safety. The short-term focus is on optimization of the present structure concentrating on projects such as the choke point initiatives to strengthening the current system and technology. Then, the longer-term airspace redesign projects will incorporate technological and conceptual enhancements.

NATCA has been involved in NAR since its inception in April 1998. We have one full-time liaison, eleven regional representatives, and about 350 controllers nationwide who are involved in NAR. In March, NATCA and the FAA signed a Memorandum of Understanding which states that changes to the National Airspace System should be based on increasing safety, efficiency and capacity, and any modifications are to be made in the best interest of the users of the system and the flying. The goals of NAR are clear: maintain system safety; decrease system delays; increase system flexibility and predictability; and increase user access.

In addition, this August marks the 20th anniversary of the PATCO strike when approximately 11,350 air traffic controllers were fired. The FAA spent most of the 1980s hiring and training a

replacement workforce. By 1992, the controller workforce was restored to pre-strike levels, and hiring was halted. Now, after two decades, the air traffic controller workforce and the country are about to feel the aftershock of the PATCO event.

The thousands of controllers hired during the post strike recovery period will reach retirement eligibility in just a short period of time. Retirements will dramatically increase until 2007, when they will peak at 8.4 percent of the workforce. By 2010, cumulative retirements will exceed 50 percent of the workforce.

Mandatory overtime, six-day work weeks and understaffed shifts are what air traffic controllers will be facing if the government does not do something now to prepare for this crisis. Currently, there are not enough controllers to fill the gap, and it takes anywhere from 2 to 4 years to become a full performance level controller. We believe that the FAA must immediately begin hiring and training the next generation of air traffic controllers.

Senator Max Cleland will be introducing legislation to lessen the impact of the retirement crunch. The current annuity computation for air traffic controllers under the Civil Service Retirement System actually encourages early retirement because it contains a disincentive to defer retirement beyond the point in service when the guaranteed level is reached. There are approximately 5,000 air traffic controllers under CSRS.

Senator Cleland's bill would change the CSRS annuity computation to give air traffic controllers

the same annuity that is afforded to both federal firefighters and law enforcement personnel. This will provide the necessary incentive for these individuals to continue to work beyond their date of retirement eligibility. While the FAA will still need to hire new air traffic controllers, the changed annuity option will lessen the impact of the retirement crunch, and provide the necessary time for the new hires to receive the training they need to become full performance level air traffic controllers.

One thing is clear, privatization has no place in the discussion of aviation delays. It only detracts from the important tasks that lie ahead. Privatization will not increase airport capacity, or build more runways or airports. It is simply a business-oriented solution being offered by so-called think tank experts and others who stand to make a profit. Proponents argue that competition in the private sector allows companies to provide services more efficiently while reducing costs. It is foolish to think that a change in ownership will improve safety, increase capacity and reduce costs. Private companies will constantly balance their bottom line against my bottom line: the safety of the travelling public. Some things should not be reduced to dollars and cents.

Proponents often point to Canada's privatized system as the solution. However, Nav Canada is the perfect example of a not-for-profit air navigation corporation with a single-minded focus on saving money. The system is financed by fees charged to passengers and collected by the airlines to cover the costs incurred by Nav Canada in providing air traffic control, flight information, and other services. However, instead of investing surplus revenue in new technology, modernization efforts, staffing or infrastructure projects, Nav Canada has chosen to reduce air navigation fees

charged to airlines, and to give the airlines fee rebates. Profits are being put before safety.

Let the words of Mike Murphy, an Ottawa based aviation safety consultant and former head of air traffic control in central Canada, speak for themselves. “The motive is to save money and make it more efficient but efficiency often works at the expense of effectiveness,” Murphy said. “In our business, effectiveness is otherwise known as safety.”

According to Murphy, the Canadian Automated Air Traffic System, or CATS, has been, “wound down over the years to the point where it’s probably going to deliver 40 percent of what was promised and the cost is double or triple what it was supposed to be.” The CATS system, five years overdue, has yet to be installed in Canada.

According to the Canadian Press, the Transportation Safety Board of Canada has repeatedly cited Nav Canada for overworking its employees, pointing to excessive overtime, understaffing and fatigue as problems in the air traffic system. In September Canada’s board blamed the fact a Winnipeg controller had worked 198 hours in 32 days - 43 hours more than his contract stipulated - for circumstances leading to a near collision between two Boeing 767s.

Air traffic control is an inherently governmental function. The U.S. system is a national treasure that demands thoughtful, proactive decision-making that will result in real, lasting improvements in procedures, processes and infrastructure. Privatization of this system will never be the answer because the safety of air travelers is not for sale.

NATCA looks forward to working with the Subcommittee, the FAA, the pilots, airlines, airports, and other interested groups to develop and implement concrete solutions. We want to be part of the solution. Given the important tasks and challenges facing the aviation industry, we believe that it is imperative that the remaining seats on the Management Advisory Council (MAC), especially the labor seat, be filled before any further business is conducted.

Currently, the MAC consists of seven members. The Council has held six meetings, has elected a Chairman and has begun to move forward in its mission. However, there is no labor participation on the MAC. NATCA is the logical choice to represent the unions of “air traffic control system employees.” It would be a privilege to serve as a member of the Council. I have submitted my name to the White House and the Secretary of Transportation, and I would appreciate your support of my candidacy.

Madam Chairwoman, that concludes my testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions.